

The Enumeration of Viṣṇu's Manifestations in Sanskrit Literature

Mai OKI¹

1. Introduction

This paper aims to examine the enumeration of Viṣṇu's manifestations (*prādurbhāva*, *avatāra*) focusing on their different combinations within Sanskrit literature. My approach to the topic is based on the study of passages that describe lists of Viṣṇu's manifestations in Epics, Purāṇas, Pāñcarātra texts, inscriptions, and Kāvya literature with an emphasis on their variation and development. The early stage the lists mainly in the Epics has been studied previously,² and the present paper offers a re-examination of this early stage based on new materials. Furthermore, I would like to address the issue of the first appearance of the typical list of the “ten manifestations” (*daśāvatāra*)—fish (*matsya*), tortoise (*kūrma*), boar (*varāha*), man-lion (*narasimha*), dwarf (*vāmana*), Paraśurāma, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa or Balarāma, Buddha and Kalki—in Sanskrit literature.

1. The Manifestations in the Epic Literature

1.1. *Mahābhārata*

In MBh 3.100.19-21, taking forms of a boar, a man-lion and a dwarf is merely mentioned as one of the deeds performed by Viṣṇu as the Creator in the past. A similar episode is preserved in MBh 12.326.71-73, where Viṣṇu “has taken forms” of a boar and a man-lion. In the meanwhile, it is stated in MBh 12.326.74-82 that Viṣṇu “will be born” as the twelfth son of Aditi and Kaśyapa at a specified time, he “will become” Rāma and “some *prādurbhāva*- will be born in Mathurā because of Kāṃsa.”

¹ Mai OKI is a third-year Ph.D. student in the Department of Indological Studies at Kyoto University,

Japan, and a doctoral research fellow of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science.

² Brinkhaus 1993, 2001.

MBh 12.326.94ab *haṁso hayaśirāś caiva prādurbhāvā dvijottama /*

‘O best Brahman, [all of them as aforementioned including] **Haṁsa and horse-faced (hayaśiras-) are manifestations.**’

This marks a significant change. In MBh 6.26.6-9 (BhG 4.6-9), Kṛṣṇa states that he will manifest himself every *yuga*. Therefore, the worship of Kṛṣṇa has probably motivated the idea of Viṣṇu’s manifestations.

1.2. *Harivaṁśa*

In HV, which is considered to have been composed in the first few centuries of the common era, Janamejaya is surprised that Viṣṇu has entered a human body (HV 30.3-8, 53-54). It seems that HV came into being after the significant change contained in MBh 12.326.94. Pauṣkaraka (Padmanābha), a boar, a man-lion, a dwarf, Dattātreyā, Paraśurāma, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Kalkin are all enumerated in HV 31.20-148 as forms taken by Viṣṇu.

HV 31.20ab *eṣa pauṣkarako nāma prādurbhāvaḥ prakīrtitaḥ /* ‘This one is known as a **manifestation named Pauṣkaraka.**’

Pauṣkaraka (Padmanābha) is often equated with Nārāyaṇa and is normally mentioned as the God or the Creator. This is probably the reason why Padmanābha gradually ceases to appear in the later lists in accordance with the development of the idea of manifestations, although Padmanābha frequently appears in the early lists in HV 31.20, HV 38.18 and HV 42.33. Taking forms of a boar, a man-lion and a dwarf is mentioned as one of Viṣṇu’s deeds in the past in HV 30.9-13, HV 31.21-92 and HV 42.34-35, which is also the case in MBh 3.100.19-21. The manifestations as a boar, a man-lion and a dwarf are presumably distinguished from human manifestations such as Kṛṣṇa.

2. The Manifestations in the Purāṇic Literature

Ten manifestations are listed in VP 98.72-104, BnP 2.3.73.73-105 and MP 47.237-249ab as follows: (1)Vainya (2)man-lion (3)dwarf (4)Dattātreyā (5)Māndhātṛ (6)Paraśurāma (7)Rāma (8)Vedavyāsa (9)Kṛṣṇa (10)Kalki.³ Three of the ten manifestations, namely Vainya, a man-lion and a dwarf are considered to be divine, while the other seven manifestations are cursed to be born as a human.⁴

³ The reading is based on PPL 5C. 71-91cd.

⁴ PPL 5C. 74=VP 98.88; BnP 2.3.73.87cd-88ab; MP 47.241 *etās tisraḥ smṛtās tasya divyāḥ sambhūtaḥ śubhāḥ / mānuṣyāḥ sapta yās tasya śāpajās tā nibodhata //* ‘These three [manifestations] are his divine splendid manifestations. His seven human

3. Conclusion

Concerning the enumeration of Viṣṇu's manifestations, several manifestations such as Padmanābha and a dwarf are originally referred to as Viṣṇu's deeds in his past. However, there was a tendency to add various manifestations in human forms to this enumeration after the idea of Viṣṇu's manifestations in different forms at different times had permeated through the worship of Kṛṣṇa. In some parts of the Epic composed from the second to the third century, a boar, a man-lion, the twelfth son of Aditi and Kaśyapa, Paraśurāma, Rāma and Kṛṣṇa are mentioned. These manifestations are more standardized in the Purāṇic literature such as VP and BnP from the fourth to the sixth century. And eventually Buddha has been included in the enumeration by the eighth century (MP 47.247).

As for the typical list of the “ten manifestations” (*daśāvatāra*)—fish (*matsya*), tortoise (*kūrma*), boar (*varāha*), man-lion (*narasimha*), dwarf (*vāmana*), Paraśurāma, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa or Balarāma, Buddha and Kalki —, we can see from DP12 that the *daśāvatāra* list already existed from the sixth centuries to the eighth centuries. In addition to this, one Pallava inscription of the Ādivarāha-Perumāḷ rock temple at Mahābalipuram mentioned the list. The inscription is supposed to be carved within the eighth century.

| Periods | Manifestations | Words | Passages |
|---------|---|--------------|-----------|
| 2-3c. | boar, man-lion, dwarf | — | MBh3.100 |
| 2-3c. | boar, man-lion, the twelfth son of Aditi and Kaśyapa, Paraśurāma, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Haṃsa, horse-headed | prādurbhāva- | MBh12.326 |
| 2-3c. | He conquered the three worlds by three steps, Ekāmṇava, boar, he conquered the earth for Puruhūta, lion, fire named Aurva, thousand-faced god, Padmanābha, Tārakāmaya | — | HV30 |
| 2-3c. | Pauṣkaraka (Padmanābha), boar, man-lion, dwarf, Dattātreyā, Paraśurāma, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Kalkin | prādurbhāva- | HV31 |
| 2-3c. | Padmanābha, man-lion, dwarf | — | HV38 |

[manifestations] were produced by curses. Listen to them.’

| | | | |
|-------|---|---------------------------|----------------|
| 2-3c. | Padmanābha, boar, dwarf, Paraśurāma | — | HV42 |
| 2-3c. | dwarf, lion, Bhava (Śiva), Śukra, boar, Mohinī, turtle, Rāma | — | HV65 |
| -3c. | boar, fish, turtle | — | MarkP47 |
| 4-6c. | (1)Vainya (2)man-lion (3)dwarf (4)Dattātreyā (5)Māndhātṛ (6)Paraśurāma (7)Rāma (8)Vedavyāsa (9)Kṛṣṇa (10)Kalki | prādurbhāva- sambhūti- | VP98 |
| 4-6c. | (1)Vainya (2)man-lion (3)dwarf (4)Dattātreyā (5)Māndhātṛ (6)Paraśurāma (7)Rāma (8)Vedavyāsa (9)Kṛṣṇa (10)Kalki | prādurbhāva- sambhūti- | BnP2.73 |
| 5-6c. | boar, fish, turtle | — | ViP1.4 |
| 5-6c. | Āditya, Paraśurāma, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa | avatāra- | ViP1.9 |
| 5-6c. | fish, turtle, boar, horse, lion, human | — | ViP5.17 |
| 4-8c. | boar, man-lion, dwarf, he was born in Mathurā (Kṛṣṇa) | avatāra- | MarkP4 |
| 6-8c. | fish, turtle, boar, man-lion, dwarf, Rāma (Paraśurāma?), Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Buddha, Kalki | — | DP12 |
| 7-8c. | Padmanābha, infant, boar, man-lion, dwarf, Dattātreyā, Rāma, Balarāma, Buddha, Kalki | — | ŚV14 |
| 8c. | fish, turtle, boar, man-lion, dwarf, Rāma (Paraśurāma), Rāma, Rāma (Balarāma), Buddha, Kalki | — | ĀP inscription |
| 8c.? | Padmanābha, Dhruva, Ananta (Balarāma), Śaktyātman, Madhusūdana, Vidyāhideva, Kapila, Viśvarūpa, Vihaṅgama (Haṃsa), Kroḍātman (Yajña Varāha), Baḍabāvaktra(Aurva), Dharma, Vāgīśvara(Hayagrīva), Ekārṇavaśāyin, Kamatheśvara (turtle), boar, man-lion, Pṛyūṣāharaṇa (Amṛtāharaṇa), Śrīpati, Kāntātman (Dhanvantari), Rāhujit, Kālanemighna, Pārijātahara (Kṛṣṇa), Lokanātha (Manu Vaivasvata), Sāntātman (Sanatkumāras or Nārada), Dattātreyā, Nyagrodhaśāyin, Ekaśṛṅgatanu(fish), dwarf, Trivikrama, Nara, Nārāyaṇa, Hari, Kṛṣṇa, Rāma who has a shiny ax (Paraśurāma), | vibhava- | AhS5.50-56 |

| | | | |
|-------|---|--------------|--------------|
| | Rāma who has a bow, Vedavid (Vedavyāsa), Kalkin, Pātālaśayana (the lord of fire) | | |
| 8-9c. | (1) <i>aṃśa</i> of Nārāyaṇa (2)man-lion (3)dwarf (4)Dattātreyā (5)Māndhātṛ (6)Paraśurāma (7)Rāma (8)Vedavyāsa (9)Buddha (10)Kalki | prādurbhāva- | MP47.237-249 |
| 8-9c. | Viṣṇu lying on the water, Atri, Bhṛgu, Vasiṣṭha, Brahmā, Kaśyapa, fish, turtle, boar, man-lion, dwarf, Rāma(Paraśurāma?), Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Buddha, Kalki | — | MP285 |
| 9c. | fish, turtle, boar, man-lion, dwarf, Rāma (Paraśurāma?), Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Buddha, Kalkin | mūrti- | VarP4 |
| 10c.- | (1)Sanatkumāras (2)boar (3)Nārada(<i>devarṣi</i>) (4)Nara and Nārāyaṇa (5)Kapila (6)Dattātreyā (7)Yajña (8)Ṛṣabha (9)Pṛthu (10)fish (11)turtle (12)Dhanvantari (13)Mohinī (14)man-lion (15)dwarf (16)Paraśurāma (17)Vedavyāsa (18)Rāma(<i>naradeva</i>) (19)Balarāma (20)Kṛṣṇa (21)Buddha (22)Kalki | avatāra- | BhP1.3 |
| 11c. | (1)fish (2)turtle (3)boar (4)man-lion (5)dwarf (6)Paraśurāma (7)Rāma (8)Kṛṣṇa (9)Buddha (10)Kalki | avatāra- | DC |
| 12c. | fish, turtle, boar, man-lion, dwarf, Paraśurāma, Rāma, Balarāma, Buddha, Kalki | — | GG1 |

Abbreviations

- MBh *The Mahābhārata, Volume 3, Aranyakaparvan, Part I. Being the Third Book of the Mahābhārata, the Great Epic of India.* Ed. by Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1942.
- The Mahābhārata, Volume 7, The Bhīṣmaparvan. Being the Sixth Book of the Mahābhārata, the Great Epic of India.* Ed. by Shripad Krishna Belvalkar. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1947.
- The Mahābhārata, Volume 16, The Śāntiparvan, Part III: Mokṣadharmā, B, Being the Twelfth Book of the Mahābhārata, the Great Epic of India.* Ed. by Shripad Krishna Belvalkar. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1954.
- HV *The Harivaṃśa Being the Khila or Supplement to the Mahābhārata.* 2 Vols. Ed. by Parashuram Lakshman Vaidya. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1969-71.
- MarkP *The Mārcaṇḍeyapurāṇa.* Ed. by Banerjea Krishna Mohan. *Bibliotheca Indica.* Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, Bishop's College Press, 1862.
- VP *Śrīmaddvaipyaṇamunipraṇītaṃ Vāyupurāṇam.* Ed. by Ānandāśramasthapaṇḍitaḥ. Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series 49, Poona, 1905.
- BnP *Brahmaṇḍa Purāṇa of Sage Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa.* Ed. by Shastri J. L. Delhi: Motilal

- Banarsidass, 1973.
- ViP *The Critical Edition of the Viṣṇupurāṇam*. 2 Vols. Ed. by Pathak M. M. Vadodara: Oriental Institute, 1997-99.
- MP *Śrīmaddvaipāyanamunipraṇītaṃ Matsyapurāṇam*. Ed. by Ānandāśramasthapāṇḍitaḥ. Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series 54, Poona, 1997-99.
- PPL *Das Purāṇa Pañcalakṣaṇa: Versuch einer Textgeschichte*. Ed. by Kirfel Willibald. Bonn: Kurt Schroeder Verlag, 1927.
- BhP *The Bhāgavata: Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahapurāṇa, Critical Edition, Volume I, Skandhas I to III*. Ed. by Shastri, H. G. Ahmedabad: Adwait Computer Services, 1996.
- AhS *Ahīrbudhnyasaṃhitā: The Ahīrbudhnya Saṃhitā of the Pāñcarātra Āgama*. Ed. by Rāmānujācārya, M.D. Madras: Adyar Library, 1916.
- DP *Early Tantric Vaiṣṇavism: Three Newly Discovered Works of the Pāñcarātra, the Svāyambhuvapāñcarātra, Devāmṛtapāñcarātra and Aṣṭādaśavidhāna*. Ed. by Acharya, Diwakar. Pondicherry; Paris; Hamburg: Institut Française de Pondichéry ; École Française d'Extrême-Orient ; Asien-Afrika-Institut, Universität Hamburg, 2005.
- ŚV *The Śiśupālavadha by Mahākavi Māgha with Two Commentaries: the Sandehaviṣṇuśaḍhi by Vallabha Deva and the Sarvaṅkaṣā by Mallinātha*. Ed. by Sāhityopādhyāya Anantarāma Śāstrī Vetāl. The Kashi Sanskrit Series No.69, Kāvya Section No.9. Benares: Vidya Vilas Press, 1929.
- DC *The Daśāvatāracaritām of Ksemendra*. Kāvya-mālā No. 26. Ed. by Durgāprasād, MM. Pt. / Parab, Kāśīnāth Pāṇḍurang. Bombay: Nirṇaya Sagar Press, 1930 (Reprint: New Delhi: Munchiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1983) .
- GG *Gītāgovinda Mahākāvyaṃ of Jayadeva with Three Commentaries*. Ed. by Sharma, Aryendra. Hyderabad: Sanskrit Academy, Osmania University, 1969.
- ĀP inscription Sastri, Hosakote Krishna. "Two Statues of Pallava Kings and Five Pallava Inscriptions in a Rock Temple at Mahābalipuram," *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India*, No. 26. Calcutta: Government of India Central Publications Branch, 1926.

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